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Blue Oyster Cult heads a heavy-metal tripleheader at the Spectrum tomorrow night

Overcoming heavy-metal cliches

By Ken Tucker
Inquirer Popular Music Critic

Pop/Rock

Blue Oyster Cult, Dokken and Zebra constitute a triple bill of heavy-metal rock acts at the Spectrum tomorrow night. Unlike the latter two bands, however, Blue Oyster Cult has occasionally managed to transcend the usual bang-and-wail cliches of its chosen genre.

To begin with, Blue Oyster Cult is a species of "critic's band" — since its inception in the late '60s, the group has been managed by one-time critic Sandy Pearlman — and many of its songs contain lyrics written by renegade rock writer Richard Meltzer. One result of this influence is that much of the band's music and its image as a team of snarling leather-clad toughies have a clever, self-parodic edge.

The band began its life in Long Island and used two other names — Stalk Forest Group and Soft White Underbelly — before settling on Blue Oyster Cult. The band's original line-up of vocalist Eric Bloom, lead guitarist Donald "Buck Dharma" Roeser, keyboardist Alan Lanier, bassist Albert Bouchard and drummer Joe Bouchard has changed only once. In 1982 drummer Rick Downey replaced the latter Bouchard.

The Cult very rapidly developed a cult — an audience hip enough to appreciate not only Roeser's amusingly exaggerated heavy-metal guitar runs but also such mock-ominous album titles as "Tyranny and Mutation" (1973) and "Secret Treaties" (1974). During this period, poet-rocker Patti Smith was dating keyboardist Lanier and she began contributing an occasional backup vocal or lyric, a practice that continues to this day. On the band's new release, "The Revolution by Night" (Columbia), Smith has written the spookily silly words to the song "Shooting Shark."

The band had its commercial breakthrough in 1976 with the "Agents of Fortune" album, which spawned the hit single "Don't Fear the Reaper" and made it look as if Blue Oyster Cult's brand of occult-worshiping heavy metal might attract a mass audience. Certainly, the band gave stardom the old college try: When the group graduated to playing huge arenas, it began promoting its elaborate laser show, at the time the height of hipness in rock concert-going.

But nothing the Cult has recorded since "Agents of Fortune" has matched that album's witty display of melodic range and ambivalent lyrics. "Spectres" (1977), "Mirrors" (1979), "Cultosaurus Erectus" (1980) and "Fire of Unknown Origin" (1981) all replayed the essential themes and musical styles of "Agents of Fortune" in increasingly exhausted combinations, and the new album, "The Revolution by Night" is, I'm afraid, a low point for this band, which is so admirable in theory and so frustrating in practice.

Upon first listening to "The Revolution by Night," you think that the album can't get any worse than its opening cuts, "Take Me Away" and "Eyes on Fire," both of which sound like outtakes from bad Journey albums, if such a thing can be imagined. But there's also "Light Years of Love," the sort of soppy, melodramatic ballad that this band began its career reacting *against*.

For this album, the band has enlisted the aid of synthesizer wizard Larry Fast, one of those technocrats who is all skill and no inspiration; the result, for the most part, is a series of fashionable sound effects with little substance. The only song that ranks with the Cult of old is "Shooting Shark," thanks in part to the lyric and the nice, dreamy melody that accompanies the lulling whoosh of synthesizers.

But in concert, obviously, the band will not limit itself to its current material. Oldies will abound, and every time I've seen them, the band has put on an engagingly raucous show.

Blue Oyster Cult, Dokken and Zebra will be at the Spectrum tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are $8.50 in advance, $10.50 tomorrow. Tickets are available at the Spectrum box office and all Ticketron locations. For more information, call 569-9400.

Albums

Joan Armatrading, *The Best of . . .* (A & M): There are those who believe that Armatrading should have become a major force in pop music long ago. Why it never happened is one of those intangibles that are so prevalent in the recording business. Maybe this collection will help. While any "best of" list will draw debate, this one holds up well. Thrown in with the old tunes are two obligatory new ones, an annoying marketing ploy that has become routine practice. One of them, "Heaven," is fine. Otherwise, the LP features such Armatrading gems as "Down to Zero," "Willow" and "I Love It When You Call Me Names." ★★★★

Hank Crawford, *Indigo Blue* (Milestone): While jazz has become a complex mix of eclecticism and electricity, it's always a pleasure to hear a straight-ahead approach. Crawford can generally be counted on for just such an album. His alto sax style remains heavily influenced by Memphis blues and R & B, which are strong elements here. Backed with a superb cast of supporting players, he offers six solid tracks of music, ranging from the rollicking roadhouse sound of "All Alone and Blue" to the mellow "The Very Thought of You." ★★★★

Andreas Vollenweider, *Caverna Magica* (CBS): Vollenweider is a talented Swiss musician whose first American release, "Behind the Gardens, Behind the Wall, Under the Tree," gained a fair amount of attention. His main instrument is the electric (naturally) harp, and while the music occasionally drifts into fuzzy regions, the bulk of it is unabashedly pretty. So pretty, in fact, that it can be argued that the album qualifies as "background music." However, a closer listen reveals some fascinating intricacies. ★★★

T.G. Sheppard, *Slow Burn* (Warner/Curb): Sheppard is another of those young country singers who are clearly impressed with the commercial success achieved by Kenny Rogers and other practitioners of bland country music. There are moments on this release that are certainly pleasant enough, but the general quality is uninspired. ★

— Jack Lloyd

★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★ Very good ★★★ Good ★★ Fair ★ Poor.

Joan Armatrading

Jazz

Limited engagements

SPIKE COLEMAN Jazz trio performs. Orleans Mardi Gras Cabaret, 1676 Lancaster Ave, Paoli, 296-8787. From 9:30 tonight-Sat.

ARPEGGIO JAZZ QUARTET Ethical Society, 1906 S Rittenhouse Square. Information: 438-8836. $5. 8 p.m. Sat.

MONNETTE SUDLER Jazz guitarist performs with guitarist Eddie Green; bassist Tyrone Brown, and drummer Webb Thomas. Painted Bride, 230 Vine St, 925-9914. $5. 8:30 & 10 p.m. Sat.

ORCHESTRA SIEMBRA Latin jazz ensemble. J.C. Dobbs, Third & South Sts. Information: 922-8713. 10 p.m. Sun.

JOHN VANORE and Abstract Truce. Cool jazz. Filly's, 237 Chestnut St, 925-0446. 9:30 p.m. Tue.

Ongoing gigs

ADRIAN 25th & Aspen Sts, 978-9190. Pianist Tom Dolan and bassist Chuck Taylor play contemporary jazz Fris-Sats.

ALFREDO THE ORIGINAL of Rome. Philadelphia Bourse, 21 S 5th St, 627-4600. Pianist Trudy Pitts, Tues-Sats.

ALL THAT JAZZ Le Wine Bar, 119 S 18th St, 568-5247. Tonight-Sat, Carol Harris Quartet. Wed, Nite Owl. Thus to 1/26, Posmontier Bros Quartet, featuring vocalist Miss Justine, performs show tune and jazz standards.

ARLINE'S 1823 Sansom St, 569-2754. Singer/pianist Andrea Green performs jazz, pop and originals Weds-Fris.

BLUE RAM Rte 532, Washington Crossing, 493-1262. Pianist Barbara Trent plays Fris-Sats & Weds. Dixieland Jazz Band, Suns. Vocalist Sarah Dean, bassist John Ellis and pianist Gerald Price, Thus.

CAMPUS INDIA 33 S 40th St, 243-9718. James Pokorny & Friends, original fusion on harmonium, guitar, sitar and tabla, Fris-Sats.

CHAUTAUQUA 8229 Germantown Ave, 242-9221. Pianist Tom Lawton performs Thus & Sats, with vocalist Grace Cosmi (Sats only).

DOWNEY'S Front & South Sts, 629-0525. Downstairs: American Jazz Ensemble, Dixieland to modern jazz, Fris. Upstairs: Sonny Troy Trio, featuring songs by Leroy Perna, Weds-Sats.

ENTREES 4040 Locust St, 222-5897. Ken Ulansey, classical and jazz saxophone, Suns.

FROG 1524 Locust St, 735-2627. Christopher Taylor, Weds. Christopher Taylor & Bob Cohen, Thus. Sam Dockery & Christopher Taylor, Fris. Rich Rudin, Sats. Sumi Tonooka, Suns-Tues.

GERT'S 1437 South St, 545-8782. Herb Nixon Organ Trio, Fris-Mons (jam session Mons).

GREENHOUSE RESTAURANT 333 Belrose Lane, Radnor, 687-2801. Jerry Samuels, Fris-Sats. John McFadden Jr, Suns.

JUG IN THE WALL Doylestown Inn, 18 W State St, Doylestown, 345-6610. Tonight-Sat, Sy Piatt & group. Tue, jazz pianist Kathy Wallace. Wed, John Breslin Jazz Band with vocalist Betty Carroll.

LAMBERTVILLE HOUSE 32 Bridge St, Lambertville, N.J., 609-397-0202. Bob Gordon Quartet, Thus-Sats.

LE CONTINENTAL RESTAURANT 496 E Lancaster Ave, Berwyn, 647-2540. Dave Sayen Trio performs Fris.

LE COTTAGE Rte 202, Center Square, 279-8252. Bobby Harris Jazz Ensemble, standard and contemporary jazz, Fris-Sats.

THE LIBRARY 2 Bala Plaza, Bala Cynwyd, 667-3152. Steve Green, progressive jazz, Mons.

MAINLAND INN Sumneytown Pike (Rte 63), Mainland, 256-8500. Tonight-Sat, vocal jazz and swing with Bob Barboni and Pam Orlando. Mon, jam session featuring Bob Barboni, Pam Orlando and Bill Angelucci. Other performers Wed-Thu.

McGLINCHEY'S 259 S 15th St, 735-1259. Progressive jazz with pianist Scott Tucker, bassist Gerald Benson and drummer Ed Watkins, Thus & Sats.

NOT QUITE CRICKETT Latham Hotel, 17th & Walnut Sts, 563-9444. Fri-Sat, straight-ahead jazz featuring singer Suzanne Cloud and pianist Eddie Green. To 1/14. Suns, jam session with the Eddie Green Trio.

PIANO BAR at the Commissary, 1710 Sansom St, 569-2240. Fris, original and unusual standards with pianist Heath Allen and saxophonist Ken Ulansey. Through Jan.

RICK'S CABARET 757 S Front St, 389-3855. Tuxedo Junction, bebop jazz and songs from the '30s and '40s, Thus-Sats. Metropole Jazz Band, featuring vocalist Sarah Dean, Suns. Other acts Mon-Thu.

RUSTY SCUPPER NewMarket, Front & Lombard Sts, 923-0291. Finesse, contemporary ensemble featuring flutist Kathy Roche, Fris.

SECOND OFFICE 1323-27 Race St, 567-6891. Monette Sudler, Weds.

ST. DAVIDS INN Lancaster & Radnor-Chester Rds, St Davids, 688-5800. Dobson & Strauss, popular jazz, Fris-Sats & Tues-Thus.

TAXI LOUNGE 22d St & Erie Ave, 225-0397. Gil Lewis Trio, Weds.

VALENTINE'S 24th & Lombard Sts, 546-1197. Guitarist Jon Dichter, popular, contemporary and originals, Thus-Sats.

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